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Peace, African-style

As the conflict in Ukraine continues to escalate, it may be time for the West to take African peace efforts more seriously

The June 2023 peace mission to Ukraine and Russia, led by African heads of state, heralded a shift in the continent's strategy as it took a more proactive role, speaking on behalf of those not directly involved but still heavily impacted by the ongoing conflict. The delegation comprised leaders and assigned representatives from seven countries – Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Egypt, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa. It was also significant that the current and former Chairperson of the African Union (AU), represented by the head of state of Senegal, Macky Sall, and the Comoros, Azali Assoumani, formed part of the delegation. In pursuit of peace, the African delegation also presented a 10-point plan that was drawn from existing proposals, thus seeking a balanced approach with the potential to appeal to various stakeholders.

In the West, these efforts were unfortunately not perceived as serious, despite the regular talk of the importance of being on equal terms with actors from the Global South. As the conflict continues to escalate, leading to hardships not only in Ukraine and Russia but also in Europe and the United States, it may be time for the West to take African peace efforts more seriously. Especially, if they offer a chance to prevent further escalation.

Western ignorance

While the African peace initiative exists within the context of various other initiatives, it remains unique and important in that, within a short period of time, African leaders were actually able to speak to both Ukrainian President Zelenskyy and Russian President Putin.

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The negative responses by some in the West have been perceived in Africa as exactly the type of arrogance that may lead the conflict to further escalation and a long-term decline of

million tonnes of grain in Africa.

Western influence in the Global South. The pushback which came from experts and ordinary South Africans regarding the accusations that South Africa armed Russia, levelled by the US Ambassador to the country, showed an underlying frustration towards the US and its European allies. Despite the major economic and reputational consequences of the – by now refuted – accusations, the apology from the US Embassy in Pretoria was not seen as sufficient to undo the inflicted damage. At the core of the constant pressure and accusations levelled at South Africa and others who have taken a non-aligned position lies the inability to listen to viewpoints that are not exactly aligned with Western actors. This ignorance needs to be addressed if the emerging multipolar order is to achieve its objectives of heralding a more stable global order, one that benefits from the experiences and viewpoints of the different regions of the world, many of them being regions of the Global South.

Among the key areas discussed with both Ukraine and Russia in the context of the peace initiative were the ongoing consequences of the conflict, especially for food security and energy security. Indeed, according to the African Development Bank, the war is directly responsible for a shortage of about 30 million tonnes of grain on the continent.

Africa as an important partner

Both Ukraine and Russia continue to have an interest in deepening their relations with Africa, possibly creating the conditions for further engagement with the African peace initiative. Ukraine still has a small diplomatic presence on the continent and may see continued engagement as an ideal opportunity to strengthen its message to African leaders, while Russia has been actively seeking ways to enhance its relations in recent years. The second Russia-Africa Summit in July produced interesting outcomes, especially as Moscow sought to present an alternative to the Black Sea grain deal through both commercial and non-commercial steps, while seeking ways to grow trade from $18 bn in 2022 to $60 bn in 2026. It would have thus not served both, Ukrainian or Russian, interests to be dismissive of African peace efforts.

It has not been rare for Ukrainian officials to regularly appeal to global audiences by invoking the consequences of missile strikes for food security in Africa and other parts of the Global South. Russia has also made its case for the cancellation of the Black Sea grain deal by stating that much of the grain exiting Ukrainian ports was not destined for the most vulnerable in the Global South but for wealthy countries instead. Moscow has also outlined its displeasure about elements of the deal related to Russia not being implemented.

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While African leaders should continue to engage with Russia and Ukraine, they may find merit in also broadening their scope by opening talks with the rest of the world to build a larger consensus for dialogue. As the largest voting bloc in the United Nations General Assembly, this would be in Africa's interest as the war in Ukraine evolves into a larger one involving not only Russia and Ukraine but key members of the EU and NATO. Africa's peace efforts should also convey the message to the international community that existing commitments towards development and the Sustainable Development Goals should remain a priority, instead of a shift towards using development budgets for narrow military objectives.

Besides hosting the BRICS Summit, South Africa will also be hosting the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) Forum with the US and other African counterparts, as well as a meeting with the European Union towards the end of the year. While largely focused on trade and investment, South Africa should also use these meetings to prepare potential follow-ups with the members of the African peace initiative to ascertain the various positions advanced by the US and the EU in their efforts to bring the conflict in Ukraine to an end.

While Ukraine and Russia continue their efforts to deepen relations with African partners, this may leave the doors in Kyiv and Moscow open to further dialogue. The African peace initiative may thus not be the main negotiation process that resolves questions such as the future of the European security architecture, but it can still play an important role in focussing the world's attention on dialogue instead of further military escalation.



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